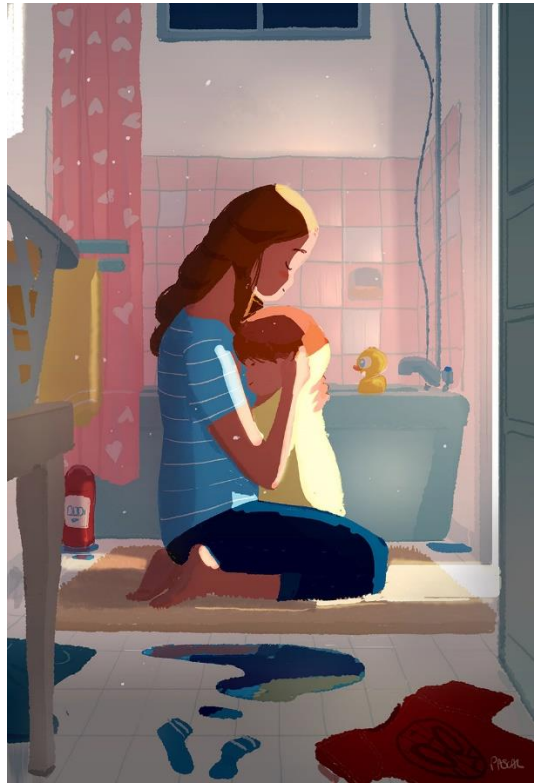


## Helping

Inspired by "Bath Time Conversations" by [PascalCampion](#)



When Shannon first learned she was pregnant, her thought was a simply, "Nope." After all, her OBGYN had told her--complete with a short pamphlet that said "What is PCOS?" on the front in a white-and-pink scheme--that her body was, essentially, incapable of conceiving. "Polycystic ovary syndrome is the leading cause of infertility in women," the doctor had patiently explained while Shannon's tears rippled the pamphlet. "I'm really sorry."

Ted took the news pretty hard--he hadn't been with her at the OB visit, since work wouldn't let him off in time--but they rallied together. Nice dinner out. A little too much wine. Conversations about adoption or other possibilities. Lovemaking. Tears at the most unexpected times.

A year or so after that trip to her doctor, Shannon noticed her period was late. Beyond the margin of error late. And so, without Ted knowing, she stopped by a dollar store and picked up a cheap pregnancy test.

She stared at the pink "+" on the window.

She checked the box to make sure she was reading it correctly.

She stared at the plus sign again.

"Nope."

She shook her head. "Nope. Not possible. Not..."

But it was. It was possible; it was real; it was also one of the worst experiences of her life.

"Whoever called it 'morning' sickness needs to be dragged into the street and shot," she moaned at one point, over halfway through her pregnancy, as she wiped the vomit off her lips, for the eighth time that day, with a strip of toilet paper. Her body felt loose, as if all of her bones were migrating away from each other. She could never get comfortable--even early on, with her slight frame, the growing fetus made it hard for her to find a position that didn't make her ache. Her cravings were sharp and mercurial, often spiking hard enough that she did the very thing she'd always sworn not to do: Sending her husband out to the store in the middle of the night to fetch her some pumpkin pie filling (or whatever bizarre desire shot through her). Of course, by the time he'd be back, she would try one or two bites, promptly puke them up, and then throw out the rest of whatever it was, as the smell was too much for her and made her stomach roil.

Of the entire process, labor was the least problematic. They knew from the beginning that she'd need a C-section--her pelvis was too small and baby Jamie too big for her OBGYN (the same one who never thought this day would happen) to feel comfortable going with a vaginal delivery--and though she was nervous about a surgery of any sort, the pros of the procedure outweighed the cons.

She wasn't ashamed to say that both she and Ted cried a lot when Jamie Monroe Blacksmith came into the world, mewling and angry at what had just happened to him.

For a time, everything was what Shannon had ever imagined motherhood to be like: Diapers and sleep deprivation, yes, but quiet moments with a small life huddled on her chest, breathing deeply with all of the confidence that a newborn has in his mother's love. She bundled him up in the cold weather, the only piece of skin peeking out from an overstuffed star was his face, paraded him about at family parties, cheered on his ability to talk and walk and eat, watched him grow.

Then, a couple of days before Jamie's fourth birthday, Ted died.

Accident on the freeway, said the police, who could only watch her as she melted into sobs and a confused Jamie tried to comfort his mommy.

The pieces of life eroded. The emptiness of the bed was chilling--so much so that Shannon got in the habit of pulling Jamie into bed with her, if only for his warmth. She worried that she was scarring the boy; she kept doing it anyway.

Funerals and paperwork; condolences and pitying looks. This became her life.

And then, one day--the first day of real warmth since Ted died on the icy roads of the worst winter in Shannon's life--Jamie worked his way past the sliding glass door and began to play 'water the garden'. His pudgy hands--still dimpled by his baby fat--worked the spigot open, pouring a jet of water from the side of the house and into the dirt below. With all the sobriety of a master artist, he took to the mud and began to paint the stucco siding.

Shannon was lost in her thoughts. That's where she spent most of her time, whenever she stopped moving. If she was cleaning the house (except for Ted's office or their bedroom; those areas she could hardly stand to go inside of, save to sleep), or

going grocery shopping, or preparing lunch for Jamie, then that was one thing. The momentum kept the grief at bay. If, however, she ran out of things to do--her house had never been this clean, her fridge this well stocked--then she'd slow and slip into the sadness that accompanied her every step.

Now, she sat on the couch, the television dark, her mind in the constant spin of grief and disbelief. Tears threatened. She gave into them, letting them pool hot and sticky in her palms as her thin frame shook.

A small hand touched her arm. "Mama? Why you cry?"

Shannon looked up to see Jamie, his face tight with concern, his body--from the top of his carrot hair to the footprints leading in from the backyard, through the kitchen, and onto the carpet of the living room--coated in a thick brown mud.

"Jaime!" The shriek startled him, making him recoil. A blaze of feeling--the most feeling she'd felt since the news came, piercing through the miasma of grief and dogged habit that had become her entire life--lit inside of her and she leaped to her feet. "What is *wrong* with you? What are you *doing*?"

Jamie's concern unbuckled into a crumpled frown beneath the muddy paint. His eyes began to water as she launched into a tirade. Every negative emotion that she'd been battling now resurged within her, venting out of her mouth as she ranted about all that Jamie had done, the horrible crimes of making her house dirty and messy being laid at the feet of her only child.

She only stopped when she was hoarse and--to her surprise--was on her knees as the hot water gushed out of the bathtub faucet. She had no memory of scooping up Jamie and carrying him in, caterwauling as he was, for a bath. She couldn't remember what she'd been saying, specifically, nor why it was so important.

What pulled her out of her grief-fueled rage was Jaime.

He stood in the hot water, naked and trembling, his tiny hands on her face while tears carved out tracks through the mud on his, and shouted, "Mommy! Mommy! Stop it! I helping. I helping you!"

For whatever reason, those words were enough to break the fever of her anger. With a gasp, she leaned forward and hugged him, her blue-and-white striped shirt marred by the muddy embrace. The water of the tub turned dark as the filth sloughed off, staining the tub with a dirty ring. Shannon didn't care.

She was too busy crying while her child--her only son, the last, permanent piece of Ted that she would ever have, the boy that she'd sacrificed so much for, who meant everything to her, and yet was the focus of her wrath and worst behavior--patted her own red hair and said, "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay," again and again, parroting her consolations but somehow making them his own.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed.

"It's okay," he replied.

They were that way for some time, the child comforting the mother, the bathwater bubbling to itself.

At last, Shannon pulled herself away, turned off the water, and set about cleaning her child. When she was done, she wrapped him in the fluffy yellow towel and pulled him in close. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Fo' what?" asked Jamie, his voice muffled by the towel.

"For forgiving me," she said, though her voice cracked as she spoke. "I needed that."

"I know, Mommy," said Jamie, looking into his mother's face with the wide-eyed stare that only young children can muster. "I help you. Okay? For Daddy."

Sniffing, she nodded. Then she did something that she hadn't really done since Ted's death: She smiled. Pulling Jamie in and kissing him on the forehead, she said, "We'll help each other. For Daddy."

Jamie nodded, then asked if he could go off and play.